Christian Growth

March 10, 2024

All living things grow. Since Christians are alive, they naturally grow as well. Growth has many aspects: growth in biblical knowledge, growth in human relationships, growth in church service, and growth in trust toward God. Ideally, growth would be balanced in all these areas, but in reality, it is often uneven. One may grow remarkably in knowledge of the Bible, while being utterly poor in relationships. Today, let us consider growth in trusting God.

Growth Before Birth

A baby grows even before birth. In the same way, Christians also experience growth before they become Christians. While encountering various teachings of Christ or associating with Christian friends, one may come to think, “A life of trusting God seems good.” Growing up in a religious environment or within a Christian culture can also be a great advantage in cultivating a readiness to trust God. What many fail to recognize is that, as human beings made in the image of God, we are nurtured in our natural religiosity by simply living out our humanity sincerely.

Growth at Birth

To be born as a Christian is simply to begin trusting the God who created heaven and earth, the God whom Jesus called “Heavenly Father.” Often this happens unconsciously, almost without realization. That is why Jesus compared it to the wind: it blows, yet you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. Psychologically, it may feel like a small step or a big one. But it begins when we decide to trust God. It occurs when our innate religiosity is joined with trust in the Creator God.

Growth Beginning with the Faith that Seeks Salvation

That trust may begin with prayer—crying out to God to escape life's troubles. It may start when one says, "Lord, please help me," in response to Jesus' invitation: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." It may also begin when, lost and unable to set a clear course in life, one is moved by Jesus' teachings and resolves, "Yes, I will make this teaching my guiding principle." Yet, realizing the weakness of one's will and the insufficiency of one's strength, one may sigh, "Lord, please help me," and whisper a prayer in the heart. This too is growth. Then, perhaps, a friend notices: "You've changed lately!" At that moment, one realizes, "Indeed, Jesus must have helped me." That awareness marks another step of growth.

Growth in Relying on God for Everything

After such beginnings, one may start to pray for everything: "Jesus, please help me." Here, too, we see growth in trust toward God. This is like human relationships: when faced with something difficult or beyond one's ability, one says, "Let's ask Uncle," or "Let's rely on Grandpa." Just as people are glad to be relied upon, so God, even more than human beings, delights in being relied on. He even seems to be the kind who, when asked, "cannot say no." That is why He sometimes seems angry: "Why don't you come to Me for help?" God loves to be relied upon, but when we make only selfish requests, He may withhold His answer. Through this back-and-forth, we build a relationship of trust with Him.

Growth in Making Selfless Requests

God especially rejoices in prayers that are not selfish. What are such prayers? They are prayers not for ourselves but for others—for their blessing, healing, or help. Even more, God delights when we pray for those who dislike us, who hate us, who harm us—for our enemies. Jesus taught, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." To repay evil not with revenge or curses but with acts of kindness and prayers of blessing—when we reach this point, we have attained a higher stage of Christian faith and trust.

Growth in Wanting to Be Useful

Another stage is moving from prayers for personal blessing to prayers that our lives might be useful to God and beneficial to others. It is the growth of faith that desires to be of service, even at personal cost. This begins with a simple, childlike wish, like the boy who offered his small lunch to help feed a hungry crowd. Jesus gladly received his offering and multiplied it greatly. Likewise, Jesus cherishes such pure-hearted prayers and desires to nurture them.

Growth Toward Self-Sacrificing Faith

Then comes growth into a faith willing to give up home, family, honor, and position for the sake of God's work and the salvation of people. Simple, humble service is precious, but casual or thoughtless dedication is not pleasing to God, for the path is harsh and full of trials. That is why Jesus spoke so sternly to those who lightly declared, "I will follow You wherever You go," saying, "Whoever wants to follow Me must deny themselves…" In this way, He discouraged half-hearted dedication. This higher stage of faith ultimately leads to martyrdom. Some rare individuals, like Mahatma Gandhi, show the very pinnacle of humanity created in God's image. While many of us may not have such extraordinary strength, with God's help, many are enabled to walk this path.

Growth into Trust Without Asking

It is wonderful to reach the point of asking God for everything in prayer. But there is also a higher trust that does not even ask. I myself, as a preacher, have lived under rather harsh financial conditions, even to the point of suffering malnutrition that affected my eyesight. Yet I have never once prayed for money. Still, when I look back, I realize I lived rather abundantly—not in the sense of how much I possessed, but in how much I was able to give.

Two years ago, I had surgery for rectal cancer. Later, stage-four liver cancer was discovered, and I was told it was inoperable, with a prognosis of one to three years. I sought a second opinion at a clinic specializing in advanced treatments for terminal

liver cancer, but was refused: “We can do nothing. Please continue with your current doctor.” That was around the beginning of last summer. But in mid-February this year, after a PET/CT scan, I was told that both the liver cancer and the signs of metastasis had completely disappeared.

Many people had prayed for me. I am truly grateful. My late wife, too, three years ago, joyfully skipped her way into heaven. I remembered then: neither of us had ever prayed for healing for ourselves. We both believed that God could heal, and we had seen many others healed through prayer. Yet we never once prayed for our own healing. We shared the conviction: “Our lives are in God’s hands. Whether we live or die, we are in His hands. We have no worries.”

So now, receiving the diagnosis that the cancer has disappeared, I am a little perplexed about what to do next. Still, I feel it is not something to make a fuss about. Perhaps God is saying, “Live and serve a little longer.” So I simply pray, “As You will,” and tell those around me, half-jokingly, “It seems the disliked child lingers on.”

The apostle Paul, I believe, held a similar faith. He confessed that he prayed three times for his weakness to be taken away, yet it was not. From his expression, it seems he did not continue praying after that. He must have felt that living with weakness was itself to live within God’s hands. Jesus taught us to look at the birds of the air: “They do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.” He also said that not even one sparrow falls to the ground apart from the Father’s care. This is the ultimate way of trust—living completely entrusted to the heavenly Father.

Please forgive me if I have spoken in a self-congratulatory way about my own faith. I only share what has happened recently, in the hope that it may be of help. Many Christians have called my recovery “a victory of faith, a miracle of healing.” Yet I feel it may be a little different. Perhaps God was not answering my own faith, but the faith of those who prayed for me.